

THE NATURE OF THE JAPANESE VERB, SO-CALLED.

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(Read April 12, 1912.)

In the first place, what is properly a verb? The term was first applied to a clearly defined class of Greek and Latin words, and has ever since been supposed to belong to words of essentially similar character in those and other languages. As the old grammars undertake to describe that character, a verb is a word that signifies to be, to do, or to suffer; that is, broadly an action; but is the definition not so general that it might include even the words existence, action, experience? Is a verb not more precisely and distinctively a term that in a single word expresses not only being, doing, or suffering, but at the same time indicates personality, time, mood and voice, either all of them, or, at least, personality? Under personality, may be included an indication not merely of the person strictly speaking (whether first, second or third) of the subject, but its number, and in some languages its gender. Even the so-called impersonal verbs of Latin showed that their true subject was of the third person, either some undefined being, as in *tonuit*, it thunders, or a clause, as in *placet*, it pleases. It may be objected that many parts of the English verb do not of themselves indicate personality at all, as in: we work, you work, they work. But it can be answered, even without urging that the word work is, in reality, not a verb, that the general scheme of inflection in a language is not invalidated by the fact that in some cases the same form recurs; as, for example, the nominative, accusative and vocative of Latin and Greek neuter nouns. It is, however, preposterous to set up a scheme of inflection where all the forms throughout all the words of the whole language are the same. To the objection that may also be raised that the infinitive and certain other parts of, for instance, the Latin verb do not indicate the person of the subject, it might be answered that those parts are not strictly verbs, any more than the

word action is, and that they have only been classed under verbs because they are in mode of formation closely connected with them, and have at least some semblance of voice, mood, tense, and govern any direct or indirect object in the same case as the other verbal forms. It may, however, be admitted that for these reasons, especially the last, certain forms without the distinction of person may be classed with verbs that have it; but it may well be considered extravagant to set up a class of verbs which do not have in any form whatever any indication of person.

The so-called Japanese verb is, clearly, not only lacking throughout every form in the essential feature of person (including number and gender), but it completely lacks also any true indication of time, mood, or voice; only in voice is there an approach to such an indication, which, nevertheless, is very readily explained without recourse to the device of calling the words verbs, and is no more marked an indication than is found in the very words existence, action, experience, which no one pretends to call verbs. Indeed, one of the absurdities of our foreign grammars of Japanese has been that the same particle that was called an indication of the object (the accusative) of a verb in the active voice, was necessarily called the sign of the subject of the same verb in the passive voice. If it be objected that, according to these principles, there would be strictly speaking no passive voice in English, the fact may readily be admitted; for the English passive seems really to be wholly a factitious one, the nearest translation we can give of the Latin.

The Japanese verb, then, is a word that indicates neither person, gender, number, time, mood nor voice; has, therefore, not a single distinguishing characteristic of the verbs of other languages. It is plainly nothing but a verbal noun (like working, striking, loving), with which it agrees in every respect, not only in the presence of the features which it has, but in the absence of those which it has not. Just like other nouns, it has, at times, postpositions joined to it, and is joined to other nouns as an adjective, just as nouns are used as adjectives in English.

This real character of the Japanese verb did not clearly appear to me, at field-work in Japan, in 1873, until after six or eight months of greenly groping, misled by the common grammars; but, then, the

idea was of the greatest value in aiding progress in the use of the language. It seemed, however, certain that a principle so elementary, important and obvious must have been long ago perceived by professed philologists, and should have been made familiar to schoolchildren at the outset of linguistic studies. At length, after two or three months more of absence in the mountains, a return to Tokio made possible a confident and successful search for some previously published elucidation of the facts. It was, to be sure, found only in one place, in a brief and much too neglected note by the great Wm. von Humboldt on Oyanguren's Japanese Grammar, published by the Société Asiatique in the *Supplément à la Grammaire Japonaise du Père Rodriguez*, Paris, 1826. Notwithstanding Humboldt's knowledge of Japanese was doubtless very slight, compared with what hundreds of Americans and Europeans now possess, his acumen was sufficient to perceive that the Japanese verbal forms essentially differed from the European verb. He said (page 6):

“Les verbes Japonais portent moins que ceux des autres langues le caractère verbal, par la circonstance que leurs inflexions ne varient jamais, quant aux personnes (gram. de Rodr., § 26); car ce qui caractérise surtout le verbe, c'est qu'il doit toujours y avoir une personne qui y soit affectée, tandis que les noms ne se rapportent aux personnes que dans certains cas, où sous certaines suppositions.”

He further points out that the subject of the so-called verb is connected with the verb by the postpositions *no* and *ga*, genitive particles turning the pronominal subjects into possessive pronouns,

“et le verbe est ainsi traité comme un nom substantif. Le Japonais n'est pas la première langue dans laquelle j'ai cru trouver ce singulier phénomène.”

On my pointing out, some weeks later, this evidence of the substantive character of the verb to a fellow American exile who was beginning to talk Japanese, he said: “But what difference does it make whether you call it a verb or a verbal noun?” Certainly, the recognition of the difference by name, and in fact, aids greatly in learning the language. You, thereby, readily acquire the habit of boldly, and to the Japanese altogether intelligibly and naturally, connecting the verbal noun with other nouns or pronouns by the possessive or other particles, or of using the verbal noun simply (like

any other noun) as an adjective before another substantive; and, knowing the real meaning of the verbal noun, you do not habitually attribute to it the distinctly different significance of a true verb, to the greater or less bewilderment of the Japanese hearer.

The varied forms of the verbal noun to which the names of voice, mood, and tense have been given are compounds, especially with the so-called substantive verb, more or less closely welded into single words. The passive voice is formed by compounding the verbal noun with another verbal noun, of which the root is *e*, meaning *getting*, or *receiving*; as, striking-getting, or striking-being-getting, or striking-receiving, being struck, or to be struck. The passive is sometimes used in a potential sense, and is so called; as, for example, *it is (to be) heard*. Other compounds form what have been called the indicative, imperative, conditional, conjunctive, concessive, causative and desiderative. In like manner, yet other compounds have been called tenses, present, past and future. The so-called future, with the termination *oo*, or *ou*, or *an*, *en* or *in* (so written, but really nasal vowels), derived from *amu* of the older language, is sometimes more correctly called the dubitative, but is much used as we use the future, something doubtful, or probable, being applied more particularly to future things; but often, as our so-called future with us, of present things; as, "it will be so," in the case of some probable explanation of a fact. The derivation of the termination from *amu* seems really to show that we have here a clear case of what some learned philologists would consider a shocking impossibility, a derivation pointing back even to the language, or utterances, or noises, of brute animals; though it can hardly be seriously denied that human speech must have been originally derived from the utterances of brutes, nor that it is wholly possible, and not a quite absurdly extravagant supposition, that here and there some traces; or relics, of that remote age may yet be found. The *amu* seems, in fact, to be originally the *h'm* of doubt, a nasal with the mouth closed, which is still used by lower animals in modern times, as a part of what may be called their language, the smelling of an unknown object. But a nasal made with the mouth open, commonly softened to an *n*, is essentially a mark of rejection (as regards the mouth, ejection, or a snort in the lower animals); that is, of denial.

The widespread use of these sounds with unchanged significance, in different languages, seems to point clearly to a common origin of the languages, in spite of differences of grammar, which, to be sure, indicate remoteness of affinity, yet cannot make it credible that the origin of human language was multiplex. Language can have had but a single origin, and all languages must have come eventually from one source; and distant as may be the branching from common stocks, it should not be considered incredible that occasional traces of the original source should be found in languages of unlike grammar.

Indeed, there are many resemblances, coincidences, if you please, between Japanese and European words; such as: *mushi*, an insect, and Latin *musca* and French *mouche*, a fly. But yet more striking, because more complicated, is such a resemblance as is to be seen in the demonstrative pronouns, this (near me), that (near you) and yonder (distant from both of us). In Japanese, though there are no strictly personal pronouns, these demonstratives are respectively *kore*, *sore*, *are* (the *re* appearing to mean thing), or in the adjective pronoun forms, *kono*, *sono*, *ano*; in which the distinctive syllables of at least the first two have a remarkable etymological likeness to the Latin *hic*, *iste* and *ille* (formerly *olle*), as well as, for the first two, the Greek *ἐγώ* and *σú* and the Latin *ego* and *tu*. The word *so* (according to what you have heard) is almost, or quite, identical, both in meaning and sound, in Japanese and English and German; but is said to be derived from *shika*.

One fundamental way of grammatically classifying languages might be based upon the general structure of their sentences; and then, further, on the welding, or not welding into terminations. A sentence has a subject, or theme (which is not necessarily the agent of an action, the subject of the Latin verb), an agent, an object (sometimes) and a verbal word. The sentence, or thesis, is a description of either the agent, the object, or the action. In Japanese, the verbal noun, naming the action, comes last, is the goal, the thing described by the sentence; the object (indicated by the postposition *o*, or *wo*, which might be translated, in connection with) comes before the verbal noun, and the agent (sometimes indicated by the postposition *ga* or *no*, genitive particles) comes before the

object; and the theme comes first, and is sometimes also the agent, and is indicated by the particle *wa*. For example: In Northampton, the landscapes are fine; "in Northampton" is the theme, or subject of discourse, and in Japanese would be followed by the particle *wa*, which might be translated, "as to," or "about"; in English, a slight pause and a comma would take the place of that particle; in Chinese, there would probably be a slight pause. In many cases, the agent of the action is also the theme, and is followed by *wa*.

In English and in Chinese, the agent of the verbal action comes first; then, the verb, or verbal noun; then, the object, if any, in connection with which the action takes place. The object is the thing aimed at by the whole sentence. In this important respect, there is a strong resemblance between these two languages, which have commonly been considered irreconcilably unlike, and which are, of course, historically extremely distant. Evidently, languages may, in the lapse of ages, through tribal vicissitudes and migrations, undergo radical grammatical changes, and pass through stages so wholly unlike their former condition, as to bring them into the same class with languages that had been widely different from them.

In Greek and Latin, the agent is the goal at the end of the sentence, the ultimate thing described by the whole thesis, or sentence, and is closely welded to the verbal noun in the form of a personal termination; while the object, in the accusative, precedes the verbal noun (for example: *Animum rege, qui nisi paret, imperat*). The agent (the so-called subject of the verb), in more precise form precedes the object; and, in general, may be considered the theme, or subject of discourse, and would in Japanese be followed by the particle *wa*.

Of course, the personal pronoun that is so welded to the verbal root, in the termination of the verb, was originally a separate word, to which that noun was, as the Japanese verbal noun frequently is, an adjective (striking-I, working-you, loving-he), and, by degrees, in time, became abbreviated and joined to that root in a single word. Of course, too, other terminations were at first separate words, and gradually, in ages of repetition, became completely joined to the root. For example, the termination of the Latin infinitive, *re*, is undoubtedly the more or less complete remains of what was originally a

separate word. When, thirty years ago, it was suggested, at a meeting of the American Oriental Society, that the Latin infinitive termination *re*, not only meant *thing*, as it evidently does, but was connected with the Latin word *res*, it was scornfully and crushingly objected that the infinitive originally ended in *se*, and was much later changed to *re*. But what of that? So much the better. It makes yet more clear the close affinity between *s* and *r*, both made in the same part of the mouth, with the attitude of the tongue but slightly changed. The word *res* may, then, very likely have formerly been pronounced likewise with an initial *s*, instead of *r*; and, at any rate, the close affinity of the two sounds makes plain the true meaning and origin of the *s* in the Latin genitive and plural and nominative singular terminations, and in the English possessive and plural terminations. The plural termination may have been originally a doubling of the simple singular form. Of course, those terminations, like the verbal ones, must have been, at first, separate words with a signification of their own. The connection between the not yet united words must have been that of adjective and substantive; and the like connection, in the case of genitive, or possessive, must have existed between the yet unwelded compound and the name of the thing possessed. For instance: *Charles's box* was *Charles-thing box*. Undoubtedly, the other Latin terminations may eventually find a like rational and simple explanation, with like originally adjectival connection.

It is nothing against this simple and rational explanation of the Latin infinitive termination *re*, and the Latin case termination *s*, and the English possessive and plural *s*, that even in so grammatically distant a language as Japanese almost precisely the same sound should be similarly used. Call it a coincidence, if you will, yet, even so, it is interesting. In the ordinal numbers, *hitotsu* (one), *futatsu* (two), *mitsu* (three), etc., the syllable *tsu*, with a very short *u*, apparently meant originally thing. In bare counting, *hi*, *fu*, *mi*, etc., that syllable is omitted.

Furthermore, the Japanese possessive particle, or postposition, *no*, already mentioned, and translated *of*, is evidently in reality an abbreviation of the word *mono*, which means thing, just as those

Latin and English terminations of the same significance do. The literal translation of *Saburo no katana* would, therefore be: "Saburo-thing sword," for Saburo's sword; and the expression "Saburo-thing" would be two nouns adjectivally connected, and that expression, again, would be adjectivally prefixed to "sword." The two words *tsu* and *mono*, both meaning thing, may either have originally had different origin, and been adopted into the language from different sources, perhaps at different times; or may have had at first a slightly different shade of meaning. *Tsu* may have meant a thing by itself, apart, independent, and be connected with *tatsu*, standing, Latin *stare*. *Mono* may have meant rather a single object, or combination, a united thing, the Latin *unus*, and the Greek *μόνος*, the English *one*. Even in English, *one* is often used in the sense of thing; as in, good ones, bad ones, little ones, big ones, young ones. The termination *ing*, also, appears to have the same original meaning; as, *loving* (Latin *amare*, or *amase*).

It is a striking coincidence, to say the least, that the German genitive and plural terminations are not only alike, as the Latin and English ones are, but, together with, likewise, the infinitive termination, are *en*, so similar to Japanese *no*. The same termination occurred in antiquated English, and less than sixty years ago, about 1854, I myself heard a countryman in Massachusetts speak of "two housen" (that is, two housing, or house-in', with still quite an intelligible meaning). Evidently, this *en* termination, as well as *ing*, and the antecedent separate word from which they were derived must have had the same meaning as the termination *s* and its antecedent word; and must have been more or less closely identical with the word *one* and the German *ein*, Latin *unus*, and Greek *ἕν*.

The other Japanese genitive particle, already mentioned, *ga*, appears to be a contraction from *no-ka*, the *ka* being, perhaps, an indefinite something, or somewhat, like the Latin *quid*; and probably the same as the interrogative particle *ka* placed at the end of Japanese questions, as *kya* (allied to *quid*) is placed at the beginning of Hindoostanee questions, plainly meaning *what*. *Ga* is defined in Hepburn's dictionary, not only as a "sign of the genitive case," but as "designating the subject of an intransitive verb, having also an indefinite sense; as: *ame ga furu*, it rains" [that is, of rain falling

is]; and “sometimes as designating the object of a transitive verb, same as *wo* [the usual accusative particle]: *chichi ga nomitai*, I want to nurse, said by a child” [of milk drink-wishing is]. These strangely mixed qualities of possessive particle, verb-subject and verb-object are a result of calling a mere verbal noun a verb.

This fact of the close correspondence of the possessive, plural and infinitive terminations in Latin, English and German is certainly remarkable, even without any reference to corresponding sounds with the same meaning in a language grammatically and historically so distant as the Japanese; and should not be disregarded out of any prejudice against noticing verbal resemblances in languages not closely related grammatically. It appears, too, incontestable that the terminations are derived from what were once separate words, and that those words could have had no more appropriate meaning than the one here assigned.

In English, the word *of*, unlike the Japanese genitive particles, or postpositions, *no* and *ga*, is a preposition placed before its noun. It appears to be closely allied to the word *off*, and to indicate something off from its noun, or its offshoot, literally or metaphorically. The French and Spanish *de*, and Italian *di*, commonly translated *of*, appear, however, to be the Latin *de*, and to mean *concerning*, a meaning somewhat different from *of* and much closer to the significance implied in the adjectival relation. The adjective is a grouper, or indicator of a class, with its noun a specifier of a member or members of the group; as: a good book, high mountain, country man, spring lock, dancing school. The French say: *école de danse*, *école des mines*, a school concerning dancing, a school concerning mines, not off from dancing, or off from mines. In like manner: *Département de l'Intérieur*, Department concerning the Interior; not off from the Interior, but Interior Department, of the class, or group, of Interior things. So, with many other phrases that are apt to be barbarously transferred, with mistaken desire for literalness, into English.

Plainly, when the present terminations of Indo-germanic languages were in their original form of separate words, the connection between words was purely adjectival, as it still is in Japanese, and as it may still be regarded in our western languages, if we bear

in mind the true original significance of the terminations; and all words should, then, be considered to be strictly nouns, and to be adjectivally connected with one another, as the parts of compound words are always connected. The oversight of this necessary connection of two parts of compound words, the first as adjective to the second, has led to some common mistakes as to the real meaning of the compounds, and to the impression that the order of the component parts made no difference in the meaning. For example, it has been supposed that the meaning of the names Theodore and Dorothy were the same; Theodore would be God-gift, and Dorothy would be Gift-goddess. Spermophile, seed-loving, Anglophile, English-loving, Russophobe, Russian-fearing, are correctly used; but Phil-hellene means friendly Greek, and Philander, not man-loving, but a loving (or friendly) man. Philadelphi means friendly brothers, and Philadelphia means friendly brotherhood, not brotherly love. Philosophy would, accordingly, appear to be, not love of wisdom, but friendly wisdom, the occupation of the philosopher, or friendly wiseman, as contrasted with that of the mere sophist; and the modern word philology (perhaps meaning properly science of loving) should have been logology, or glossology. That universal acceptance and high authority are not a wholly unimpeachable guaranty against mistranslations is evident from flagrant errors that are to be seen outside the range of our present subject. For instance, a scholar profoundly versed in the Chinese language has given currency to the translation "Middle Kingdom" for the Chinese name of China proper; but the same expression is used in Japan for the Central Provinces, or Home Provinces (or our Middle States, which would be so written in Chinese), and that appears to be the true meaning. The Japanese (or Chinese) name for Corea, Chosen, has somehow come to be translated Land of the Morning Calm; but its real meaning is Morning Earliness, *sen* meaning fresh, or new, as recently caught fish is fresh. While Japan means Sun-rising, the country next westward is appropriately called Morning-early. Evidently, we cannot put implicit faith in what has come from high sources and has been widely accepted.

In Chinese, totally without welded terminations, words are plainly connected only in the adjectival way, and as, in the writing, there

are no punctuation-marks, the meaning is not always clear to a beginner. We have the same source of obscurity in English, especially in shop-signs and brief inscriptions. A Chinaman might, for example, find it difficult to know the precisely correct meaning of an inscription on a certain wagon in Philadelphia: "The largest old book store in the city"; or of the signs: "Circular Saw Mills"; "Fine Fur Felt Hats"; "North Broad Street Farmers' Market"; or the advertisement-heading: "Excelsior Straightway Back Pressure Valve"; or: "The Vane School Garden Base Ball Team." In the spoken language, the pauses and intonations indicate the grouping of the words and the consequent meaning. The grouping might well be shown in printing with the hyphen; but that would be irksome in manuscript writing, unless the hyphen should conventionally be written with a little quirk, too small to be taken for the letter *e*, and without lifting the pen: "Old-book store."

It is clear, then, that the so-called Japanese verb is in reality merely a verbal noun, and that much is to be gained by calling it by its right name, and bearing its true character in mind, and remembering that its connection with other words is precisely adjectival, either as an adjective itself, or as the substantive to an adjective. It is plain, too, that in European languages the terminations that give to words the distinctive meaning of different parts of speech were originally separate words connected in the same adjectival manner to the present roots, and that the original significance of those separate words before being welded into mere terminations was, in the case of the Latin and English genitive and plural terminations in *s* and the Latin infinitive termination in *se* (now *re*), simply *thing*; which, also, is the original meaning of the German possessive, plural and infinitive terminations in *en*, and of the antiquated English plural termination in *en*; and of the termination *ing* of English verbal nouns. The resemblance between the two western terminations in *s* and *en* and the Japanese particles *tsu* and *no* of like meaning, though not at all essential in identifying the character of the terminations, is interesting, whether regarded as merely a coincidence in languages grammatically far apart, or as possible relics, together with many others equally remarkable, from some

extremely ancient common language, leading back towards the original human language and even towards the utterances of brute animals. Evidently, the earliest languages must have had their words connected purely as adjectives and substantives, as is still common in English, and is universally the case with the parts of compounds. The English language shows that the grammar of a language may within a few hundred years become radically changed; and, in spite of historical and geographical remoteness, has acquired grammatical resemblance to Chinese.